

Sith, Slayers, Stargates, + Cyborgs

Modern Mythology in the New Millennium

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“Small World”: Alex Proyas’ *Dark City* and Omnitopia

*Andrew Wood**

A woman encounters a stranger at a dock on the river’s edge. Looming over them, framing them, the city glows at night. The woman looks over the water; she is fearful that her husband is lost and may not return. The stranger knows this and much more. He possesses a secret knowledge that both the woman and her husband do not know each other at all. Bound up in faked photographs and implanted memories, their love is an experiment concocted for an alien purpose. The stranger understands the experiment because he is one of the researchers. To the woman, the city is a labyrinth that has caught her husband. To the stranger, the city is a laboratory in which people and places are warped, edited, and erased, a place where memory and identity constitute a mutable construct. The stranger visits the woman and toys with her, speaking the words implanted in her husband:

Mr. Hand: There used to be a ferry when I was a boy. Biggest thing you ever saw, lit up like a floating birthday cake.

Emma Murdoch: That’s just what my husband once said to me, on this very spot.

Mr. Hand: Where is your husband now?

Emma Murdoch: I wish I knew. What brings you here?

Mr. Hand: I met my wife at this place.

Emma Murdoch: It’s where I first met my husband.

Mr. Hand: Small world.

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The world is smaller than he admits. Its limits and purposes stretch no further than the bounds of the city that encloses them both.

This is a scene from *Dark City*, a 1998 film by Alex Proyas that joins Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis* and Ridley Scott's 1982 *Blade Runner* as an indispensable text for students of urbanity in popular culture.¹ With its potent visual iconography and illustration of contemporary trends, *Dark City* offers a cinematic critique of enclavic urbanity that demands closer attention than it has thus far received. Indeed, like its major characters, *Dark City* initially encountered a closed system, a small number of viewers who were drawn to its peculiar convergence of noir detective procedural, psychological thriller, and science fiction effects-fest. The film's plot focuses on an amnesiac accused of murder and his efforts to learn his identity. As he seeks clues about his past, the protagonist encounters a group of "strangers" who possess a startling secret. His struggle with the strangers reveals truths about his character and his world that inspire the audience to question the nature of reality itself. This presumes, of course, that an audience would sit through the film.

A box office flop in the United States, *Dark City* inspired unflattering comparisons to *The Matrix*, despite appearing on screens one year prior to that hit film.² However, mirroring the spiraled evolution of *Dark City*'s narrative, the film managed to grow into a cult favorite, aided by rentals, midnight screenings, and film critic Roger Ebert's personal evangelism.³ Paralleling its popular growth, *Dark City* has also begun to attract international scholarly attention from researchers in American studies (Blackmore, 2004; Gerlach & Hamilton, 2004), cultural studies (Milner, 2004), and media studies (Hayles & Gessler, 2004; Higley 2001; Tripp, 2005), along with English and linguistics (Marsen, 2004). But more work remains to be done, particularly on the film's unique statement about the changing myth of the frontier.

In this chapter, I seek to contribute to this expanding conversation by focusing my attention on *Dark City*'s comment on the changing nature of urbanity. This analysis grows from a larger interest in the role of myth in cinema, the means through which broad ideas of how one should live become encapsulated in iconic figures, tropes, and types—in this case, the frontier and the city. Here, I argue that *Dark City* provides a lens to view contemporary urbanity with its illustration of an enclosure whose inhabitants reside in a kind of daze, manipulated by forces they cannot see. Initially, this analysis requires

a brief overview of the mythical frontier as a counterpoint to the urban maze portrayed by *Dark City*. Following this overview, I employ an omnitopian framework to map out the means through which the frontier has been banished by the cinematic city, leaving in its place an enclave from which one can scarcely hope to escape or even to imagine the possibility of departure. I conclude with remarks on how *Dark City's* critique of omnitopia, while suggesting a return to the frontier, rests on a troubling implication for heroes who cannot be termed human.

Birth of the Mythical Frontier

Scholarship on the frontier myth almost invariably begins with the "frontier thesis" posited by Frederick Jackson Turner at a meeting of the American Historical Association held at Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition. Prior to Turner's presentation, the vast majority of historians seeking to uncover the development of the American mind focused their attentions to the nation's European roots. The prevailing wisdom held that America's national identity sprang from its association with the Old World and grew always in relation to that parentage. Turner, in contrast, proposed that the frontier rather than the homeland offers more insight into the New World.⁴ Turner differentiated the European and American notions of frontier: the former referred to a heavily guarded boundary; the latter indicated the line demarcating freedom from convention. Rather than separating two established entities, the American frontier opened up possibilities beyond what had been established. Consequently, those who pursued the frontier did not seek to protect the conventional order but rather faced adversities and overcame challenges in a manner best illustrated by the persona of the frontiersman. While often quoted, this passage by Turner offers apt illustration:

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier. (p. 37)

Turner's thesis concludes by announcing the *closing* of the frontier due to the nation's rapid urbanization, further differentiating urban

